

Israeli Elections Produce Mixed Feelings for Palestinians

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Brief Analysis

The results of the Israeli elections have created mixed feelings, bringing a bit of despair along with a bit of hope as well. On the one hand, for Palestinians such as myself, there is a despair that there was little difference in terms of the peace process whether the right-wing coalition led by the Likud party wins, the centrist coalition led by the Blue and White party wins, or a unity government is formed by both of them. Neither alliance had peace negotiations on their political platform, both supported extending Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and the settlements in the West Bank, and both support united Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Even so, the response to Israeli politicians' more extreme rhetoric against Arab voters suggests some positive elements of the elections. Netanyahu's last-minute land grab campaign pledge to extend Israeli sovereignty to the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea area—annexing “all the settlements” in the West Bank, and Jewish enclaves in Hebron and the other regions—was not the political silver bullet he believed it to be. Instead, this pledge was met with widespread condemnations internationally while failing to bolster pro-settlement vote and earn him the votes he needed to obtain a majority. Nor did his warning that Israel needed a leader capable of standing up against the Trump administration's “Deal of the Century” peace plan hold water.

On the contrary, the election results and subsequent unity government formation process suggests that Netanyahu's most recent anti-Arab remarks backfired. Instead of motivating more of his supporters to vote, his statements pushed more Arab citizens to vote instead. Extremists parties campaigning on a pro-settlement platform did not earn the backing they expected, and the party that wanted to deport Palestinians didn't receive enough votes to have seats in the Knesset.

Even so, anti-Arab rhetoric has continued after the elections, in particular from Netanyahu. In response to the results, he claimed: “Now that we have established the right-wing bloc, there are only two options: A government led by me, or a dangerous government that relies on the Arab parties.” He has further stated: “At this time, more than ever, especially in the face of the huge security and political challenges at stake, a government that relies on the anti-Zionist Arab parties must not be established. Every effort must be made to prevent such a dangerous government.” Netanyahu's rhetoric has also targeted Arab citizens, writing on Facebook that “the Arabs want to annihilate us all—

women, children, and men.” This attitude is sad and discouraging indeed.

Despite Netanyahu’s continuing references to Israel’s Arab Palestinian minority as dangerous to the security and welfare of the state, this minority group is part of the Israeli democratic fabric and must be recognized as such. Netanyahu’s rhetoric and unsubstantiated allegations of voter fraud in the Arab community suggest that this community easily becomes the target of the frustration of a slipping politician. It is interesting to note that such claims of voter fraud in Arab communities are usually made by political opposition potentially as a way to explain away their poor results rather than those in power.

These statements and accusations also demonstrate that Netanyahu has failed to learn from the negative repercussions of his infamous speech in the 2015 elections that the Arabs are rushing to the polls in droves. Nor did he learn from the political experience of American politicians such as George Wallace, who as the Democratic Governor of Alabama strongly opposed desegregation but later in life felt compelled to apologize to the African-American community for his racist stance. Even so, while one should hold admiration for the judicial system prosecuting a prime minister, I find it challenging to understand the psyche of those voters who continued to support a politician facing prosecution for multiple corruption charges.

And despite (or because of) this racist rhetoric, many Arab voters chose to participate in the elections rather than boycott them. The accomplishment of the Joint List—a coalition of the four largest Arab-majority parties—of receiving thirteen seats made it the third-largest party in the Knesset. This status should empower it to play a prominent role in placing on the Israeli agenda two key Arab demands; first, to renew the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians; and second, to improve living conditions for the Arab community in Israel.

The most recent elections confirmed that the path taken by the Joint List to unify its front and take part in the elections was the right decision and that the Islamic Movement’s decision to boycott the elections was the wrong track. Voter turnout among Arab Israelis has risen significantly compared to previous elections, and the subsequent role that the Joint List has played in government formation has made it clear that cooperation and not confrontation is the way for the future participation of Arab citizens of Israel in the Israeli democracy.

However, Palestinians are still looking towards the future for an election in which Israeli parties call for an end of the occupation and a two-state solution. One may admit that the Palestinian extremists have contributed to moving Israeli politics to the right. But the role of Palestinian moderates should be to push the conversation back towards the center by continuing to engage in dialogue with moderate Israelis to restart the peace negotiations.

But until such conversations become part of the national campaign rhetoric during the elections, this minority will remain somewhat removed from the democratic process. The results of the elections have neither hardened nor softened the political views among Palestinians, as from the start, this minority did not expect that the results would make any changes to the peace process. Until then, the two-state solution will have to wait for future elections to bring a courageous, visionary, and peace-oriented Israeli leader. ❖

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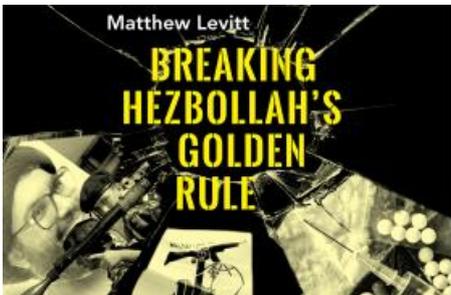
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